H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jing Tsu. *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature: The Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895-1937.* Standford: Stanford University Press, 2005. 344 pp. Illustrations. $58.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5176-6.

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Published on H-Nationalism (December, 2008)

Commissioned by Paul Quigley (University of Edinburgh)

Failure and Chinese Nationalism

There is a long and rich history of self-loathing in modern Chinese literature and society. This masochistic self-obsession with uncovering and picking at the wounds of a deeply flawed and vulnerable Chinese national character has taken a variety of forms: Sun Yat-senâs attack on the belching and spitting habits of the "Chinaman" who foreigners considered more base than dogs; Lu Xunâs caricature of the servile dimwit Ah Q who finds hollow moral victories over those who beat him; Su Xiaokangâs highly influential critique of the backward and decrepit peasant culture of the Yellow River in *River Elegy* (*Heshang*) which helped spark the Tiananmen Square bloodshed of June 4, 1989; the more recent image of the docile and helpless Han Chinese âsheepâ in Jiang Rongâs *Wolf Totem* (*Lang Tuteng*); and the widely circulated list of âChinese Grievances,â with its desperate cry of âwhy do you hate us so much,â which has widely circulated the Internet following the recent kerfuffle over the Olympic torch. Even in the face of Chinaâs $40 billion âOlympic moment,â its citizens seem reluctant to let go of failure–unable and unwilling to allow the perceived injuries of the never-ending âcentury of humiliationâ (*bainian guochi*) to heal and pass.

How do we begin to make sense of this conundrum of self-flagellating national pride: the way in which nations like China seek redemption in the failures of the past, and renewal and unity in the fragile and fractured souls of the modern individual? Jing Tsuâs provocative and innovative book, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature,* opens up new critical spaces for us to explore the modalities of failure in the construction of narratives of national identity.

In seeking to evaluate cultural narratives of nation-building during Chinaâs tumultuous transition from empire to nation-state, the author trods on well-trammeled academic ground. She makes good use of previous works by John Fitzgerald, Rebecca Karl, Lydia Liu, Frank Dikotter, Sun Lung-kee, and others, while sharply shifting the focus from resistance and marginality to defeat and narcissism. Instead of viewing victimhood (or what she terms the âdrama of social sufferingâ) as an inauthentic

derivative or strategic form of identity construction, Jing Tsu argues that âfailure achieves that distinct prerequisite of nationalism that perhaps no other positivistic definition can compel, the recognition of a singular destiny that is the foundation of sovereign thinkingâ (p. 222). The author, an assistant professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale University, proposes a new âinterdisciplinary approachâ for exploring nationalism in modern China, one that combines history, political science, and international relations with literature, psychology, and even biology to broaden our understanding of the enduring emotive appeal of narratives of national identity and meaning.

Jing Tsuâs eclectic (if not always particularly lucid) approach leads her to explore the discursive âpromiscuityâ and âversatilityâ of failure across a vast range of literary texts from late Qing (1895-1911) and early Republican China (1912-37). In narratives about the yellow race and peril, eugenics and racial renewal, beauty and femininity, and masculinity and masochism, the author explores different manifestations of this trope of failure. Here the fear of racial ruination so clearly articulated by Lin Shuâs translation and commentary on Harriet Beecher Stoweâs *Uncle Tomâs Cabin* (1852) sits beside the racial vengeance of the yellow peril depicted in the 1909 futuristic novella âElectrical Worldâ (*Dian shijie*); and the racial flaws identified in Pan Guangdanâs writing on eugenics and Lu Xunâs highly influential literature become rallying points for the defense of the nation against real and imaginary enemies, reflecting the âembeddednessâ of failure in the cultural life of Republican China. In the works of female writers like Xiao Hong and Ding Ling and male authors like Yu Dafu and Guo Murou, the author seeks to excavate the ambivalent âpsychic topographyâ in which narratives of beauty (both masculine and feminine) come to desire suffering, defilement, and sacrifice in order to seek a sort of Freudian release, redemption, and even âticklish pleasure.â

Yet, the boldness and roaming nature of the authorâs literary gaze is also one of the bookâs chief shortcomings, for in places it tends to flatten the complex political and social contexts in which these texts were composed and in which their authors operated. For example, the âyellow raceâ that Liang Qichao and other late Qing intellectuals spoke of came to compete with other categories of identity–such as Chinese (*Zhongguoren*); Han (*Hanzu* or *Han minzu*), and the Chinese race (*Zhonghua minzu*)–as Chinese intellectuals struggled to delineate the contours and contents of the nation. In the dynamic context of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century China, narratives of humiliation and injury at the hands of the alien Others interacted in complex ways with alternative narratives of moral stewardship and ethnic chauvinism over the familiar Other of Chinaâs vast Inner Asian frontiers. On the steppes, or even in the countryside, the debased âChinamanâ of the Foreign Concessions became revolutionary cadres of progress and civilization. As Peter Hays Gries has rightfully pointed out, narratives of âChina as victorâ and âChina as victimâ have co-existed and fed off one another throughout the last century and continue to play a central role in defining Chinese identity.[1]

As a historian, the real contribution of this book for me lies less in its literary analysis than in the new interpretative framework it suggests for thinking more broadly about the dynamics of nationalist sentiment. For Jing Tsu, the passion and meaning of nationalism can be found in the perpetual yet unobtainable desire to right past wrongs both personally as well as collectively. Here, nationalism is viewed as a cultural pattern or psychological process rather than a political movement or ideological abstraction. In seeking to decouple nationalism as a personal emotion from the nation as a political movement, Jing Tsu argues that ânationalistic subjects often endorse the sentiment of nationalism without agreeing on a coherent vision of the nationâ (p. 23). Thus framed, the author provides a powerful critique of the vast literature on nationalism as false consciousness or fictive identity, convincingly demonstrating how âthe embrace of failure belies not a mentality of submission but a strategy of negotiationâ (p. 21). In other words, the authorâs work uncovers a mode of being in which the modern self finds psychic meaning and purpose not in allegiance to some abstract âimagined communityâ but rather in the longing for and comfort of a future state of personal renewal and collective redemption.

Despite the bookâs focus on China, one finds parallels throughout the modern world. In the mythologies of Hiroshima, the Holocaust, ANZAC Cove, and 9/11, we encounter different inflections of *kumen* (âsuffering,â âagony,â and âmental anguishâ) which continue to shape national identity formation in Japan, Israel, Australia, and the United States just as it does in China. Thus, even though Chinese athletes won more gold medals than the Americans at the Beijing Olympics, we would be naÃ¯ve to expect the idiom of failure to disappear from Chinese discourse. As Jing Tsu reminds us, failure is a mode of modern being rather than an end point, meaning that there are always new hurdles (as Chinaâs Olympic poster-boy Liu Xiang knows all too well) to overcome.

Note

[1]. Peter Hats Gries, *Chinaâs New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 69-85.

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Citation: James Leibold. Review of Tsu, Jing, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature: The Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895-1937.* H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. December, 2008.

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